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Quran

1 message

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Stylistic Features

The Qur'an has its own style. It may be useful to readers to mention some of the important features of this style. The reader should not expect the Quran to be arranged chronologically or by subject matter. The Qur'an may present, in the same sura, material about the unity and grace of God, regulations and laws, stories of earlier prophets and nations and the lessons that can be drawn from these, and descriptions of rewards and punishments on the Day of Judgment. This stylistic feature serves to reinforce the message, to persuade and to dissuade. This technique may appear to bring repetition of the same themes or stories in different suras but, as the Quran is above all a book of guidance, each sura adds to the fuller picture and to the effectiveness of the guidance. For instance, in the midst of discussion about divorce and settlements, it suspends the introduction of regulations and instructs the believers to keep up prayer and stand in obedience to God (2: 237–8), later to resume discussion of the divorce regulations. While urging people to give in charity, before the day comes when there will be no trade and no help from friends or intercessors, it shifts to the Throne verse (2: 255) to the glory of God and refer to the time when no one can intercede for anyone else. Afterwards, having reminded people of God's power, it resumes its injunctions to give in charity. In a religion that seeks to affect people's beliefs and behaviour in all aspects of life it is never sufficient to say something once or twice, and if the material on God, on earlier prophets, or on the Day of Judgement were each dealt with only once, the effect would not be so all-pervasive. This technique compresses many aspects of the Quranic message into any one sura, each forming self-contained lessons. This is particularly useful as it is rare for anyone to read the whole Qur'an at once: it is mainly used in short sections during worship and preaching, as well as by individuals or on television and radio in daily readings.

A central feature of Qur'anic style is **contrast** between this world and the next (each occurring exactly 115 times), between believers and disbelievers, between Paradise and Hell. This has been studied in great detail, and scholars have found truly remarkable patterns of contrasts: angels and devils, life and death, secrecy and openness, and so on, occurring exactly the same number of times.¹³ This sense of balance in the text is continued in passages where the Prophet is instructed to say, 'Now the truth has come from your Lord: let those who wish to believe in it do so, and let those who wish to reject it do so' (18: 29) and 'There is no compulsion in religion: true guidance has become distinct from error' (2: 256) (one of the names the Qur'an gives for itself is al-Furqan—the book that distinguishes [right from wrong] (25: 1)).

One stylistic feature that makes the Qur'an particularly effective is that God **speaks directly** to people (e.g. 56: 57–73) and to the Prophet, often using 'We', the first person plural of majesty, to represent Himself. It involves the readers/listeners by questioning, directing, and urging them, alternating this with information (e.g. 56: 47–74). The Qur'an is also full of dialogue between God and His prophets (e.g. Abraham in 2: 260; Noah in 11: 45–8), between prophets and their audiences (e.g. Salih and the Thamud people in 11: 61–5), and between different individuals (e.g. Solomon and the hoopoe, Solomon and his chieftains, and the Queen of Sheba talking to her advisers, all in 27: 19–44).

One of the obvious stylistic features of the Qur'an is the use of **grammatical shifts** from one personal pronoun to another (e.g. third to second to first person speaker; from singular to plural of majesty), and in the tenses of verbs. This is an accepted rhetorical practice in Arabic, similar to features used in some European literature. It is called in Arabic **iltifat** (i.e. 'turning' from one thing to another). One example (4: 114) is changing from talking about God, in the third person, to God Himself speaking in the first person plural of majesty: 'There is no good in most of their secret talk, only in commanding charity, or good, or reconciliation between people. To anyone who does these things, seeking to please God, We shall give a rich reward.' Instead of saying 'He will give him . . .', God speaks in the plural of majesty to give His personal guarantee of reward.¹⁴

¹³ A. Nawfal, al-Ijaz al-Adabi lil-Qur'an al-Karim (Cairo, 1976). ¹⁴ M. Abdel Haleem, Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Style (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001), 187–208.

Introduction xxi

The Qur'an always offers justification for its message, supporting it with **logical argument**, for example in explaining the unity of God (e.g. 21: 21–2; 23: 91; 36: 78–83). The Qur'an supports its statements with reference to the past (the history of earlier nations and prophets), to the present (to nature as a manifestation of God's wisdom, power, and care), and to the future (life in the Hereafter and Judgement), in addition of course to reminding people constantly of God and His attributes.

Another feature of the Qur'an is that it does not name individuals, with a few rare exceptions such as prophets and angels, but consistently uses techniques of **generalization**. One method of achieving this is the use of general words like 'those who' or 'whoever', giving the message universal application. Thus, in permitting Muslims to defend themselves, it gives permission generally to 'those who have been driven unjustly from their homes . . .' (22: 40 ff.). This will apply at any time or place. When it urges the Prophet to deliver the message, even when dealing with his own personal situation and feelings, instead of saying 'You should deliver the message and fear none but God', it speaks of 'those who deliver God's messages and fear only Him and no other: God's reckoning is enough' (33: 39). Reformers, preachers, and anyone standing for the truth can apply this readily to themselves, because such statements are put in a proverbial style. Verses of the Qur'an are therefore readily quoted and inscribed on plaques which can be hung on the walls of offices, houses, courtrooms, and so on as an inspiration or a reminder.

Issues of Interpretation

Over the years, a large body of commentaries on the Qur'an has accumulated, and differences in interpretation can be observed both between the various traditions within Islam (such as Sunni, Shi'i, or Sufi),¹⁵ and between different periods in history. It is not the intention here to go into detail (see the Bibliography to this volume for useful works for further reading), but some illustrative examples may give the reader some understanding of the complexity and sophistication of views that arise from reading the Qur'an.

¹⁵ For a definition of these terms see I. R. Netton, *A Popular Dictionary of Islam* (London: Curzon Press, 1992).

Introduction xxii

An important feature of the Qur'anic style is that it alludes to events without giving their historical background. Those who heard the Qur'an at the time of its revelation were fully aware of the circumstances. Later generations of Muslims had to rely on the body of literature explaining the circumstances of the revelations (asbab al-nuzul),¹⁶ and on explanations and commentaries based on the written and oral records of statements by eyewitnesses. These oral testimonies were collected and later written down.

Interpretation is further complicated by the highly concise style of the Qur'an. A verse may contain several sentences in short, proverbial style, with pronominal references relating them to a wider context. Moreover, proverbial statements can be lifted from the text and used on their own, isolated from their context and unguided by other references in the Qur'an that might provide further explanation. Both non-Muslims eager to criticize Islam and some Islamic extremists have historically used this technique to justify their views.

Some examples will illustrate this feature, for instance the verse 'Slay them wherever you find them' (2: 191),¹⁷ thus translated by Dawood and taken out of context, has been interpreted to mean that Muslims may kill non-Muslims wherever they find them. In fact the only situations where the Qur'an allows Muslims to fight are in self-defence and to defend the oppressed who call for help (4: 75), but even in the latter case this is restricted to those with whom the Muslims do not have treaty obligations (8: 72). The pronoun 'them' here refers to the words 'those who attack you' at the beginning of the previous verse. Thus the Prophet and his followers are here being allowed to fight the Meccans who attack them. The Qur'an makes many general statements but it is abundantly clear from the grammar and the context of this statement that this is not one of them.

'Wherever you find them' or 'come up against them' is similarly misunderstood. As exegetes and commentators explain, the Muslims

¹⁶ The asbab al-nuzul are found in Qur'an commentaries. They identify the circumstances of the revelations and refer to names and details of what actually happened.

¹⁷ N. J. Dawood's translation, *The Koran*, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth, 1990). This has been used as the title of an article, ' "Slay them wherever you find them": Humanitarian Law in Islam', by James J. Busuttil of Linacre College, Oxford, in *Revue de droit pénal militaire et de droit de la guerre* (1991), 113–40.

were anxious that if their enemies attacked them in Mecca, which was and is a sanctuary (in which no Muslim is allowed to fight, or kill even an animal or plant), and they retaliated and killed, they would be breaking the law. The Qur'an simply reassured the Muslims that they could defend themselves when attacked, even if they killed their attackers, whether within the sanctuary or outside it. However, the six verses that concern war (2: 190–5) contain many restrictions and are couched in restraining language that appeals strongly to the Muslims' conscience. In six verses we find four prohibitions; seven restrictions (one 'until', four 'if', two 'who fight you'); as well as such cautions as 'in God's cause', 'be mindful of God', 'God does not love those who overstep the limits', 'He is with those who are mindful of Him', loves 'those who do good', and 'God is most forgiving and merciful'. The prevalent message of the Qur'an is one of peace and tolerance¹⁸ but it allows self-defence.

Equally misinterpreted and taken out of context is what has become labelled as 'the sword verse' (9: 5) although the word 'sword' does not appear in the Qur'an: 'When the [four] forbidden months are over, wherever you find the polytheists, kill them, seize them, besiege them, ambush them'. The hostility and 'bitter enmity' of the polytheists and their fitna (persecution: 2: 193; 8: 39) of the Muslims during the time of the Prophet became so great that the disbelievers were determined to convert the Muslims back to paganism or finish them off: 'They will not stop fighting you [believers] until they make you revoke your faith, if they can' (2: 217). It was these hardened polytheists in Arabia, who would accept nothing other than the expulsion of the Muslims or their reversion to paganism, and who repeatedly broke their treaties, that the Muslims were ordered to treat in the same way—either to expel them or to accept nothing from them except Islam. But, even then, the Prophet and the Muslims were not simply to pounce on such enemies, reciprocating by breaking the treaty themselves: an ultimatum was issued, giving the enemy notice that, after the four sacred months mentioned in 9: 5 above, the Muslims would wage war on them.

Yet the main clause of the sentence—'kill the polytheists'—is singled out by some non-Muslims as representing the Islamic attitude to war; even some Muslims take this view and allege that

¹⁸ See Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an*.

this verse abrogated many other verses, including ‘There is no compulsion in religion’ (2: 256) and even, according to one solitary extremist, ‘God is forgiving and merciful’. This far-fetched interpretation isolates and decontextualizes a small part of a sentence and of a passage, 9: 1–15, which gives many reasons for the order to fight such polytheists: they continually broke their agreements and aided others against the Muslims, they started hostilities against the Muslims, barred others from becoming Muslims, expelled them from the Holy Mosque and even from their own homes. At least eight times the passage mentions the misdeeds of these people against the Muslims. Moreover, consistent with restrictions on war elsewhere in the Qur’an, the immediate context of this ‘sword verse’ exempts such polytheists as do not break their agreements and who keep the peace with the Muslims (9: 7); it orders that those enemies seeking safe conduct should be protected and delivered to the place of safety they seek (9: 6). The whole of this context to verse 5, with all its restrictions, is ignored by those who simply isolate one part of a sentence to build on it their theory of war and violence in Islam.

One further cause for misinterpretation is the lack of awareness of the different meanings of a given term in different contexts (see below, ‘This Translation: Identifying Aspects of Meaning’). Thus, for example, in Dawood’s translation: ‘He that chooses a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted of him and in the world to come, he will be one of the lost’ (3: 85),¹⁹ it has to be borne in mind that the word *islam* in the Arabic of the Qur’an means complete devotion/submission to God, unmixed with worship of any other. All earlier prophets are thus described by the Qur’an as *muslim*. Those who read this word *islam* in the sense of the religion of the Prophet Muhammad will set up a barrier, illegitimately based on this verse, between Islam and other monotheistic religions. The Qur’an clearly defines its relationship with earlier scriptures by saying: ‘He has sent the Scripture down to you [Prophet] with the Truth, confirming what went before: He sent down the Torah and the Gospel earlier as a guide for people’ (3: 3–4). Indeed it urges the Christians and the Jews to practise their religion (5: 68, 45, 47). They are given the honorific title of ‘People of the Book’, and the Qur’an appeals to

¹⁹ The Koran, translated by N. J. Dawood, Penguin Classics.

Introduction xxv

what is common between them: 'Say, "People of the Book, let us arrive at a statement that is common to us all: we worship God alone, we ascribe no partner to Him, and none of us takes others beside God as lords" ' (3: 64).

The Qur'an forbids arguing with the People of the Book except in the best way and urges the Muslims to say: 'We believe in what was revealed to us and in what was revealed to you; our God and your God are one [and the same]' (29: 46). God addresses Muslims, Jews, and Christians with the following: 'We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good: you will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about' (5: 48). The Qur'an allows Muslims to eat the food of the People of the Book and marry their women (5: 5). These are explicit statements which Muslims involved in interfaith dialogue rely upon.

Misinterpretation is also observed with regard to the status of women. For example, 2: 228 'husbands have a degree [of right] over them [their wives]' has been variously interpreted by Muslims and non-Muslims to relegate women in general to a lower status, when in fact this cannot be based on this verse. The reference here is not to 'women' and 'men' but to 'wives' and 'husbands'. The context is in questions of divorce, between wives and husbands. Partly based on a misinterpretation of this verse, for example, most traditional scholars came to the view that Muslim women could not be judges, whereas Abu Hanifa (d. ah 150/767 ce), the founder of one of the four main schools of Islamic law, and modern jurists in many Muslim countries (although not all) do also allow women to be judges.

A further example of discrimination against women due to disregard of context is found in the way some scholars interpreted 2: 282. In urging the recording of a debt in writing, the Qur'an says: 'Call in two men as witnesses. If two men are not there, then call one man and two women out of those you approve as witnesses, so that if one of the two women should forget the other can remind her.'²⁰ The majority view was to generalize this to all testimony and all

²⁰ Many translate tadilla as 'err', not realizing that one of the many meanings (wujuh) of the verb is 'forget'.

THE QUR'AN

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